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Cats



One of them is introduced as "thin as a rake" and suffering from "palsy that makes his paw shake," "but no longer a terror to mice or to rats, for he isn't the cat that he was in his prime." Then old Asparagus clears his throat, and in a creaky and heart-felt voice narrates his past, when he "understudied Dick Whittington's cat" and "used to know seventy speeches by heart." Wearing rags with face painted of different colors like his brethren, Gus (as his name is shortened to) tells us calmly with his right paw shaking that "these modern productions are all very well, but there's nothing to equal from what I hear tell, that moment of mystery when I made history, as Fireforefiddle, the Fiend of Fell."

While Richard Stafford's new production of "Cats" at Pantages Theatre doesn't always dazzle your senses, it's full of poignant moments such as when Gus clears his throat or Grizabella waits for someone to speak to, moments that give "Cats" the most human emotions and make for those "moments of mystery" when history is made.

The appearances by Grizabella (Anastasia Lange) are always filled with intrigue, such as when she enters as what they called "the glamour cat." Of Lange's two renditions of "Memory," the hit song from "Cats," the most memorable is the last, in which she finally unleashes her voice, urging "touch me, it's so easy to leave me, all alone with the memory, or my days in the sun." Lange always finds the right place to pause, especially during the last song, after "I am waiting for the day." Dressed as a very funny looking cat, especially compared with the others like Munkustrap and Skimbleshanks, Grizabella plays the part of the faded cat well, much as a Norma Desmond character ought to look. Her ascension to the Heavyside Layer on a lift may look melodramatic, but the way the other cats rally beside her in the middle of the second singing of "Memory" is heartfelt with a tinge of sadness.

The other great role belongs to Gus (Nathan Morgan), the theatre cat who "in his youth was quite the smartest cat" but is no longer a terror to rats or mice. In the middle of his song, Gus recalls once playing Growltiger, and launches into a skit in which he sings Italian duets as a pirate "rejoicing in his title of The Terror of the Thames." The production gives a sense of timelessness while evoking the old movies of the pre-sound days by its use of Eastern cat doll-soldiers, operatic singing, and an over-sized curtain for a show within a show. Every time Gus mentions his old days of theatre work, we get a chill thinking of the memory. He claims to have acted with Irving and Tree, and "knew how to let the cat out of the bag" or how to act with back and tail. But what gets the emotions flowing is every time Gus mentions his "grandest creation as history will tell," the role of Fireforefiddle, the Fiend of Fell. Morgan is versatile, playing equally well the lusty pirate and the old, reminiscing theatre cat.

Rum Tum Tugger (Adam Steiner) is the curious cat who always prefers the opposite thing, and "doesn't care

for a cuddle." Steiner has a sort of rock-star look to him, and it works perfectly in the part about how he'd want a fish if he were offered vegetables only. Steiner even dances with a lucky audience member and ends with the "call me" hand signal for charm. Mistoffelees (Chris MacKenthun) is known as the magic cat, but in the musical, he sets off a bunch of pyrotechniques while spinning to them in his dance. MacKenthun does a great acting job also in dealing with Grizabella's appearance and making Old Deuteronomy reappear. Macavity (Drew Roelofs) is dressed in a tiger-like uniform with small tentacles. All the sound and noise that comes with Macavity gives off a sense of mystery, but it's the adage that "when a crime's discovered then Macavity's not there" that we remember most. Old Deuteronomy (Philip Peterson) has a nice song near the end, but on the whole, he's quite an unremarkable leader of the cats.

Perhaps the best dancing sequences in "Cats" take place during the Jellicle Ball. The acrobatics of some of the cats include anything from somersaults to pirouettes. The random noisy interruptions with a sort of alarm on stage are a bit annoying, but the cat's routines are remarkably feline like. Their emotions are human, but their movements are cat-like.

As befits a good "Cats" production, the cast members crawl onto the stage, frequently causing havoc with the audience, purring for food and messing with people's seats. But once onstage, the cats sing about the most human of things: "Moments of Happiness," ways of treating people--talking to them only when spoken to ("The Ad-dressing of Cats"), death and mortality ("The Journey to the Heavyside Layer"), dreams ("Gus: the Theatre Cat"), and of course, "Memory." These cats, we have to remember, are played by humans after all.

"Cats" is in repertory at the Pantages Theatre <http://www.broadwayla.org/production/show.info.asp?ID=9> in Hollywood until 21st of March, 2010.

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